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AUTHOR Taylor, C. V.
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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation of some sounds in Australian English causes ambiguities in cases where phonemes seem to have merged. This paper discusses some of the ambiguities arising from phonemic changes and provides examples of pronunciation variations in British and Australian English--mainly in vowels, but also in consonants and syllabification. Several American English forms are also mentioned. Since pronunciation ambiguities can cause problems for the student learning English as a second language, teachers must look at language sociologically and prescribe a norm for language instruction. There should be greater explicitness in the description of English as spoken by educated Australians, and similarities and difference with British English should be noted. (VM)

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Ambiguities in Spoken Australian English

There are three main areas of ambiguity in spoken Australian English which react across varieties. I am not referring to the trivial fact that varieties are different, that for example a word like 'assume' has three pronunciations (/əsjum/, /əsum/, /əʃum) which occur more or less typically in the three major varieties of English, but rather to the kind of ambiguity we experience in, for example, listening to an American using the word 'Harry' in the sentence 'He was Harry'.

Neither am I referring to problems with very broad Australian, exemplified in my case in 1962 when I approached an outback postal agent with the question: 'Do you sell stamps?' to which he replied 'Yes'. I then specified: 'I'd like airmail, please.' His answer was: 'Sorry, but your mail hasn't come in yet.' This I would call a cross-variety ambiguity rather than a within-variety one.

Most of the within-variety ambiguities concern the central vowel, but as I suggested earlier, there are two other areas, both related to this main area in some way. We begin,

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then, with the ABC, for example, informing us that 'six villages were attacked' in Vietnam. This type is a frequent source of misunderstanding and operates on the plural of the -er suffix when it follows sibilants. It includes /dʒəz/, /tʃəz/, /səz/ /ʃəz/ and /zəz/. Here are some examples:

badge(r)s	watche(r)s	fishe(r)s	blaze(r)s
lodge(r)s	matche(r)s	mashe(r)s	cruise(r)s
range(r)s	(back)benche(r)s	place(r)s	fusse(r)s
	cake-mixe(r)s		

Incidentally, this phenomenon probably accounts for the fact that a piece of equipment called a dredger in the United Kingdom has become a dredge in Australia. No distinction is normally made in the plural between these forms. The point here is that in the other two varieties of English these ambiguities do not regularly occur. They are a characteristic of Australian English. Thus in Britain, those areas which use Southern British distinguish between /wətʃəz/ and wətʃIz/, while other areas introduce an 'r' sound, e.g. Irish /λ/, Scottish /R/. In the United States, of course, /λ/ is the determining factor too.

In Britain, as in Australia, we find the words ending in -a provide ambiguity, seldom serious, in both singular and plural; beta, beater; two betas, etc. Sometimes the already existing Australian ambiguity is added to this, as in Russias or Russia's and rushes, which would not be ambiguous in the UK. Many Americans and Australians, but not so many British, conflate Rose and Rosa in the possessive form, thus: Rose's book becomes indistinguishable from Rosa's book. Once again, the British form for 'Rose' is /rəʊzIz/, so that the ambiguity here is between 'Rose' and 'Rosie'.

Initially, Australian English tends to conflate the sounds in except and accept. Once again, the British form clearly distinguishes these as /I/ and /ə/: as in Jews are accepted/excepted.

Australian English employs a secondarily stressed neutral vowel in such final positions as in 'You can get the better of it.' In unstressed position, it may sound like at, e.g. He changed at once/He changed it once.

It may, of course, be true that in the case of the sentence 'You can get the better of it' there is in fact no secondary stress on it. This would account for cases like businessman, where UK speakers prefer in a three-syllable word ending in -man to give full quality to that syllable in final sentence position or where there is no modificatory function exercised by the word. Thus in Britain people would tend to give full vowel quality to -man or -men in final position, but could use a neutral vowel in 'businessmen's lunch', though even here the tendency is not universal. It appears general in Australia to pronounce singular and plural alike here, as /bIznəsMən/ (note that the second syllable in the UK would be /nIs/).

However, in two-syllable words both varieties are alike, e.g. /mIlkmən/ for both singular and plural. This means that in Australia this kind of number ambiguity extends further than in Britain, and includes the longer words.

As with it, so also other orthographic 'i's are pronounced /ə/ in post-tonic unstressed positions. Thus David can be made to rhyme with favoured, hence the falling together of 'humid' and 'humoured'.

The second area of ambiguity concerns vowel /ə/ in combination with other elements, particularly as it affects the vowels /əʊ/ and /eI/. At first sound there would seem to be a considerable difference here. However, as Mitchell and others have shown, even in standard Australian the start of these two diphthongs can be identical, so that in rapid educated speech the second becomes /əI/, as in /stəIn/. Add to this that in the vowel /əʊ/, the general tendency towards lip-spreading produces a sound in the unstressed part of the glide which at times is indistinguishable from /I/, and we hear for 'stone' the sound /stəʍn/.

The remarkable thing is that in neither case does there appear to be confusion with the word 'stern', where the central vowel appears to have moved back a little. However, there is sometimes a tendency for the diphthong /ɛə/ to fall together with /eIə/, so that 'stairway' and 'stay away' would sound identical in some idiolects. There is a further tendency for /ɛə/ + consonant to fall together with /ɛ/ + consonant. The former only occurs with /n/ and /d/, so clashes are rare: 'they shared the blanket' v. 'they shed the blanket' is typical.

Of somewhat similar type is the loss of the central vowel in the diphthong /iə/ in certain contexts. Thus in some educated speeches 'here's the man' and 'he's the man' become hard to distinguish. This is, strangely a case where the central vowel is more and not less prominent in British English, so that whilst the vowel in Australian 'heed' is further from cardinal /i/ than it is in British or American English, the vowel in 'here' is closer to the cardinal in Australian English. If it moves still closer, a person saying 'cheers' may one day be thought to be saying 'cheese'.

The confusion between /ʊ/ and /I/ is not confined to the diphthongs of broad Australian, but in rapid standard Australian one can frequently hear a conflation in unstressed syllables. Thus 2CH may be announced in Sydney as if it were TCH, or rather, something like 'Tissy H'. However, the broad Australian pronounciation of the word 'fee' to resemble the French word for 'leaf' is a factor in the standard fronting of /i/ towards /əI/, which renders the disctinction between <u>seen</u> and <u>sane</u> somewhat less distinct. However, there is seldom a complete lack of distinction in all types of syllable. Thus there is never any question of ambiguity between <u>sale</u> and <u>seal</u>. Consonants pronounced in the forward areas of the mouth are most affected. So also with <u>sayer</u> and <u>seer</u>.

The third area is more distant from the central vowel, but some cases are influenced by it. This is the so-called dark 'l' which occurs in all three varieties of English. Both British and Australians ask for a pint of /mIək/, and the tendency seems to parallel the loss of pre-consonantal 'l' in French. Indeed in most parts of the English-speaking world a pre-consonantal /l/ considerably modifies the quality of the preceding vowel as well. Thus few people would in speech differentiate between the spellings 'Melcombe' and Malcolm'.

However, in Australian forms of speech this process also involves intervocalic /l/. For example, in 1969 I was given a name over the telephone which I wrote in my diary as 'Woolard'. Later on I realized that the name was a more familiar one, spelt 'Willard'.

In Britain there is a distinction between 'holy' and 'wholly' which concerns the vowel as well as the gemination of /l/. Thus in the first case the word falls into two

syllables, the first syllable being identical with the word 'hoe' /həʊ/. In the second word, the first syllable is pronounced as in 'hole', with a vowel /əʊ/. Many Australian speakers use the second type vowel for both cases, so that attempts at gemination provide the only clue to the distinction. The word 'holly' may at times also be confused with 'holy'. This seems to involve vowel length.

It appears that Australian English may adopt a different syllabification in such words than is the case elsewhere. The British, for example, would think phonologically of fellow in terms of two syllables, /fɛ/ and /ləʊ/. It may be that Australians think rather in terms of /fɛl/ and /əʊ/. This same process may account for the falling together of the forms 'choral' and 'coral', which are regularly distinguished in other forms of English as /koɹəl/ and /kɔɹəl/.

Some flippancies work differently in Britain from Australian and American forms. For example, a child in America jokingly called the telephone a 'bell-a-phone', and the joke involves the pun on 'bell' and the form would be so spelt in print. But for the British listener, though he would understand from the printed form what was meant, he would realize that no British child could make quite the same joke, since the second syllable in 'telephone' in England is not /ə/ but /I/. The British child rhymes the first two syllables of 'telephone' with 'telly' - hence the abbreviation from 'television'. He would therefore expect a pun on 'telephone' to come out as 'belly-phone', with quite different connotations.

The tendency with short syllables in the middle of words is not, however, at work in the same direction in all cases.

Whereas we find Australian /tɛləfəʊn/, British /tɛlIfəʊn/, there are reverse cases such as British /mIʃəkl/ against Australian /mIʃIkl/. There are yet other cases where all three varieties agree, as in 'family', where it is rare throughout the English-speaking world today to observe a full /I/ value for the middle syllable.

Australian English lacks some ambiguities found in British forms. For example, though -ers and -es are conflated, this procedure is not extended to -es and -is. As in the United States, 'taxes' is distinguishable from 'taxis', a feat which British systems do not naturally perform. Similarly with 'candid' and 'candied'.

However, there seems to be an increasing tendency to conflate medial /t/ and /d/ as is regularly done in the United States, so that 'latter' and 'ladder' fall together, and more seriously perhaps, 'riding' and 'writing'. ('Do you do much riding?') This seems to be a similar phenomenon to the situation with medial /l/ where it appears the tendency arose from the treatment of the medial consonant as a final. Thus the syllabification may be regarded as /ʃaIt/ + /Iŋ/. An unexploded plosive sounds the same whether voiced or not, so that the original distinction could be lost. Much the same process goes on in German. But in Britain, /t/ is felt to begin the second syllable, and in all varieties of English, initial /t/ remains unchanged.

Are there any lessons to be drawn here by teachers of English as a foreign language? Most such teachers in Australia would probably see their task as that of teaching educated Australian English to their pupils. Young migrants are expected to acquire a form of English acceptable in the classroom. It is usually impossible to prevent older

migrants from acquiring whatever Australian speech they hear around them, and aborigines on the whole seem to arrive at one of the broader varieties, with some exceptions. Overseas students are a more complex problem. Some belong to American speech areas and others to British.

In schools, however, most teachers would see the need for setting some kind of standard. Although the modern linguist purports to be rigorously objective and when not biassed against corpuses and data, to describe such data as he finds without concern for norms, it is still the teacher's job to look at language sociologically and prescribe a norm. It may and often does turn out to be an artificial norm, but that is partly because of the way teachers are made and partly because no-one really knows what the norm is in any scientific sense of knowing.

No-one can fight against language trends, much less speech trends. However, we can perhaps identify factors in phonology which lead to a greater explicitness in our description of the English language as found among educated Australians. We should not assume its identity with British English, yet neither should we yield to the opposite temptation of supposing that it is very different. The examples I have offered point up certain speech differences, yet they leave us with a distinct feeling that such differences are hard to isolate.

My own prediction is that in those relatively few cases where Australian English has moved away from British forms (or has remained static while the British forms changed), we should expect to find perplexities arising in the minds of migrant students, who have in the main been geared to expectations of British forms. Of course, this talk is not concerned with overall differences between Australian

and British forms, many of which are recorded elsewhere. I have merely highlighted areas where phonemes have, to all intents and purposes, fallen together. It is in these areas that ambiguity occasionally arises, if only because no-one expects it. We cannot judge how much ambiguity there is on the basis of single words, and no-one has the time to process whole discourses to discover ambiguities. But when the occasional difficulty arises, we suddenly become aware of that marginal area of a variety where misunderstandings are all the more serious because we think we have understood.

Dr C.V. Taylor,
Department of
Education,
University of
Sydney.